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ABSTRACT

Reading readiness activities should lead to awareness and skills that will bring a child to a point on the reading acquisition continuum where he or she will be ready to benefit from more rigorous and formally structured activities in the classroom. Children's awareness of the following five aspects of language and literacy are helpful, if not crucial, to the attainment of this goal. The first aspect is an awareness of the oral language-written language relationship. This is fostered indirectly when children observe that significant others in their lives pay a great deal of attention to print, and is fostered directly by explicitly drawing a child's attention to the existence of print in his or her environment. The second aspect is an awareness of the purpose and structure of books. The lap technique, in which children are first held in their parents' laps while being read to, and then begin taking the book and sitting with it by themselves fosters this awareness. The third aspect is an awareness of the directional conventions of print. Helping children gain an awareness of the two different sides of their bodies will help them master the left to right, top to bottom conventions of English print. The fourth aspect is an awareness of the "sounds" of language. Repetition, rhythm, and rhyme in children's stories and tales introduce them to the phonetic character of English. The fifth and last aspect is an awareness of the meaning of the "reading instruction register." This includes linguistic terms, such as word, letter, sound, sentence, beginning, end, and punctuation terms. (HTH)

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WHAT CHILDREN SHOULD KNOW ABOUT PRINT AND LANGUAGE
BEFORE THEY BEGIN TO READ

by

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What Children Should Know about Print and Language Before They Begin to Read

A. Introduction: Defining Reading Readiness

How does one define reading? When can it be said that a given child can read? And how does one distinguish reading readiness activities from reading activities per se?

There are, of course, no fixed boundaries between readiness activities/skills and reading activities/skills. Rather, reading acquisition is a continuum of behaviours ranging from a vague beginning awareness that print represents language to the exercise of fluent, flexible strategies that extract meaning from print in an efficient manner. Ausubel (1959, p. 246) provided a general definition of readiness for any learning as being "the adequacy of existing capacity in relation to the demands of a given learning task." This definition is useful in that it suggests that reading readiness is not an all-or-nothing affair but is rather to be assessed by comparing a child's learning capacity at any given time with the method that is used to teach reading and on how that method is executed. This paper will initially focus attention on the second part of the definition, namely, the demands placed on the child by formal reading instruction.

Although there are a diversity of methods employed in beginning reading instruction (Aukerman, 1971), there are also general commonalities among these methods. Bruinsma (1978) has defined formal reading instruction as

. . . those carefully designed instructional strategies employed

by specially trained personnel, usually in the institutional school setting. These strategies specifically include the teaching of extensive word recognition skills (sight, phonics, structural analysis, context) leading to fluent silent and oral reading accompanied by a maximum of comprehension. (p. 20)

Pre-reading or reading readiness activities are thus characterized by their emphasis on preparing the young child to master reading skills. Such activities should lead to awarenesses and skills that will bring the child to a point on the reading acquisition continuum where s/he will be ready to benefit from those more rigorous and formally structured activities mentioned above.

The goal of reading instruction is to have children successfully read connected discourse. Children's awareness of the following five aspects of language and literacy will be suggested as being helpful, if not crucial, to the attainment of that goal. These elements thus constitute important reading readiness concepts and comprise what children should know about print and language before they begin to read:

1. An awareness of oral language - written language relationships
2. An awareness of the purpose and structure of books
3. An awareness of the directional conventions of print
4. An awareness of the "sounds" of language
5. An awareness of the meaning of the "reading instruction register"

B. Exploring the Five Elements

1. An awareness of oral language - written language relationships.

Crucial to any success in learning to read is the development of an awareness on the part of the pre-reader that our printed symbol system is a means for encoding language. That is, children must come to the realization that, at a fundamental level, print represents oral language written down. As literate adults we take our awareness of this fundamental speech-print relationship for granted. Yet young children are not usually metalinguistically aware enough to realize that they use oral language and it requires exposure to print and experience with print-speech relationships to create in children an awareness that what they say can be written down and that other people can "talk" to them in print.

How is this awareness of the relationship of speech and print fostered? It is fostered indirectly when children observe that significant others in their lives pay a great deal of attention to print phenomena: to books, magazines, newspapers, signs, labels, letters, etc. It is fostered directly by explicitly drawing a child's attention to the existence of print all around. The most significant way in which adults can foster an awareness of print in young children is by reading books with them and thereby allowing the children to gradually come to realize that the print (and not the pictures) tells the story. Parents and teachers can also capitalize on the everyday world of print by drawing children's attentions to print in as specific a manner as possible. For example, when pointing to service station signs stress that this is a SHELL station or a GULF station rather than just a service station. Shopping excursions to the supermarket can be equally productive print awareness raising experiences.

2. An awareness of the purpose and structure of books.

Although print is present in a wide variety of forms, its most significant form from the point-of-view of literacy development is the book. The importance of developing in young children an appreciation of books and an awareness of how books "work" cannot be overemphasized. Robert and Marlene McCracken (1972) outline a procedure which can be used to foster awareness of the purpose and the structure of books. They refer to this procedure as the "lap technique" because at its core it involves reading with children as they sit on an adult's lap. The three phases of the "lap technique" are quoted below:

- A. The adults around an infant child read books, magazines, and newspapers. Since young children learn by imitation, this reading in front of children is mandatory.
- B. Mother and father put the child (ages six months to eighteen months for beginning) on their laps each day and hold a children's book. They talk about the pictures, they point, and eventually they read the text aloud. This continues for five or more years. This is an emotional conditioning to books; children associate books with love and warmth and parents.
- C. The child between the ages of two and five begins taking these books. He sits alone with them for thirty minutes and hour, and an hour and a half. He opens the books, looks at them, and he talks out loud about them. He recites much of the text from memory. He is interpreting symbols, he is reading silently, and he is making use of what he reads. He may not recognize any words, but he has learned that

reading is fun, reading is enjoyable, and that reading is comprehending. (pp. 18-19)

The "lap technique" provides children with an awareness of the purposes of books - of an understanding that books contain stories and poems for enjoyment as well as being storehouses of information about all manner of people, places, animals, plants and countless things in the children's environment as well as outside of their immediate experience. Since most formal beginning school reading programs emphasize narrative fiction, reading such fiction to children provides them with a sense of story structure. Golden (1984) has explored such developing concepts of story grammar in young children and argues that children's concept of story is an important variable in reading comprehension.

Parents who use the "lap technique" and teachers who adapt such techniques to group settings (see, for example, Holdaway, 1979) are providing not only information about the many joys that books can provide and how stories "work" but are also effectively modeling book handling behaviour. Children become aware that books have a "front" and a "back" and that there is a "right-way-up" and a "wrong-way-up" in holding a book. They model how pages must be turned from left-to-right in order to make sense of the story. Children who have access to appropriate books of their own can then practice these book handling skills independently. Bruinsma (1978) provides examples of such developmentally appropriate books.

3. An awareness of the directional conventions of print.

As Clay (1972) explains, pre-school seeing experiences tend to

differ considerably from school seeing experiences:

In preschool days children are constantly looking upon a wide view, viewing much and seeing little. This causes some children to observe less than they could. Seeing must go beyond just looking; it must become a systematic search for precise information in an ability to structure a mental representation of the forms that are seen. School work requires near-point vision and the development of new and precise focussing skills. (p. 13)

Many of the visual tracking skills that a child must acquire in order to be able to read connected discourse, require the specific type of instruction previously defined as part of formal reading instruction per se (cf. Clay, 1979, pp. 98-114) but directional discrimination of left and right seems to fall appropriately within our previous delineation of pre-reading skills related to print awareness.

Preschool children do not normally view objects in any particular directional sequence. They direct their eyes around the contours of objects to focus on important details but they start the search anywhere and the direction of the search is quite random. This flexibility in viewing objects is very useful because it allows the child to recognize the constancy of an object from any viewing angle. When confronted with print, however, this viewing flexibility is inappropriate. The child must learn to view the printed page from top left to top right, then return down left and repeat the pattern. This is a quite arbitrary convention of English print but it is a convention nonetheless and coming to grips with it is essential if one is to learn to read. Children can be taught the two-sided nature of their bodies quite early.

Although the four-year old may not be able to specify which side is right and which is left, s/he has the awareness that the two sides of the body are different from each other. By helping children gain an awareness of the sidedness of their bodies, parents and teachers will be assisting them with the directional perceptions necessary to read print. Here again, the "lap technique" can be of benefit. From the moment that parents begin to look at books with their children they can quietly concentrate on going through the book from front-to-back, from left-to-right and from top-to-bottom so that the child incidentally picks up clues about the "correct" way of looking at books. When the child becomes aware that the "squiggles" on the page bear a direct relationship to the story being told, parents and teachers can help children perceive the correct way to approach directionality of print by moving a finger along the lines of print as they are being read and by choosing books in which the layout helps the child to perceive the conventions used in printing the English language.

4. An awareness of the "sounds" of language.

Clay (1979) has commented that

. . . [l]ong before the child enters school, s/he can use and hear the difference between words like cup and cut in natural speech. But a child who hears and understands those words probably does not know that those words consist of several sounds and that the difference lies wholly in the last sound. This skill must be developed. (p. 63)

If children are to learn the sound-symbol relationships that

will be useful to them in decoding print, they must first become aware of the fact that language is phonetic. Yet young children (and adults, for that matter) do not find it easy to examine their own speech. The ability to "make language forms opaque and attend to them of and for themselves is a special kind of language performance" (Cazden, 1972, p. 303). This performance, known as metalinguistic awareness, involves stopping language in its tracks, as it were, and does not come easily to children. The ability to analyse the sound structure of language does, however, improve with age (Lieberman, 1974; Fox and Routh, 1975) and there are some very natural ways to create in children an awareness of the sound structure of their language. Walker (1975) speaks of the three R's of listening: repetition, rhythm and rhyme. Repetition is often inherent in children's favourite nursery stories such as Goldilocks and the Three Bears, The Three Little Pigs, etc. Not only are words and phrases and sequences repeated within such stories, (e.g., "Someone's been eating my porridge."), but the stories themselves bear frequent repeating. The repetition inherent in such stories is also a great aid to memorization and as the child becomes familiar with the stories s/he takes great delight in anticipating words and phrases, and audibly completing the sentences when the adult story reader pauses. Similar listening skills and the building of aural sensitivity can be accomplished with nursery rhymes. Such rhymes are often short and their strong, built-in rhythms make them easy to memorize. Children intuitively learn from them that certain words rhyme, that is, have the same sound or ending sound, while others do not rhyme. In addition, the alliterative nature of many nursery rhymes teaches children to recognize that spoken words can

begin with the same consonant sound.

Once children have begun to develop the ability to segment language into constituent sounds and as they become familiar with some written sound-symbol relationships, they are often eager to begin writing. They do this by initially using their own invented spellings to approximate their knowledge of these relationships (Read, 1975). For example, a five-year old preschooler playing hospital with her stuffed toy wrote, PTR RBBT IS SCK PLES GT THE DOCTR (Peter Rabbit is sick, please get the doctor) as a message to her father who was playing with her. Carol Chomsky (1976) has suggested that children's experience with such early writing focusses their attention on sound-symbol relationships in a highly conscious way that is intrinsically motivated by their desire to communicate. In turn, this sound to symbol encoding experience will greatly aid the child in the symbol to sound decoding processes involved in reading.

5. An awareness of the meaning of the "reading instruction register."

Linguists define a register as a special variety of language which can be placed in a separate category by the social circumstances and functions of its use. John Downing (1976; 1979) has argued that there exists a reading instruction register and that many kindergarten and first grade children are confused about many of the technical terms that are part of this register. Terms like "word", "letter", "sound", "writing", "printing", "sentence", etc. are not clearly understood by many five and six year olds. As well, terminology associated with punctuation ("period", "capital letter", "comma") and other structural

aspects of connected discourse (e.g., "paragraph") present comprehension problems for many of these same children. Finally, children are also often unclear about the meaning of much of the procedural discourse used by teachers: "underline", "circle", "beginning", "middle", "end", etc. Again, this is knowledge that literate adults take so much for granted that they seldom stop to think how they have come by it or that indeed, it is not self-evident. Bruinsma (1981) discovered that there is considerable variability among beginning readers in their understanding of the reading instruction register and that their level of understanding was a good predictor of subsequent reading achievement. As part of his research he measured six metalinguistic abilities in 113 children at the beginning of grade one. A test designed by Ayers, Downing and Schaeffer (1977) to measure the children's understanding of the technical language of literacy was correlated most strongly ($r=.45$, $p<0.01$) with reading achievement at the end of grade one as measured by a standardized reading test. It would seem wise for kindergarten and grade one teachers to assess their students' understanding of the reading instruction register and help those that are unsure about the above mentioned concepts develop cognitive clarity about them.

C. Conclusions

This paper has briefly dealt with five awarenesses about language and print that children should develop as they move towards independence in reading. Children can develop most of this knowledge incidentally if they are fortunate to find themselves in a social context that values reading and provides them with significant reading models. As Doris

Entwistle (1971, p. 161) has remarked, "The children who learn to read best are those who need to in order to make sense of their lives".

Parents and teachers are in the best position to create the spoken and written language contexts that will help children "make sense" of these potentially enriching aspects of their lives.

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